

Easter 5B 2021 Sermon

John 15:1-8

Jesus said to his disciples, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

It is the night before Jesus will be crucified. He has just finished his Last Supper with his disciples, and is now telling them that he will be leaving them. They have been with him three years; following him, learning from his teachings and the example of his life. They had left *everything* – some disciples had left their fishing boats and nets, some left other occupations; but they had all let go of their *previous* lives in order to pursue new lives as disciples of Jesus, fishing for people. (Matthew 4:19)

And now, Jesus has just told them that he will be leaving them. He tells them that one of them will betray him (John 13:21), and he tells Peter that he will deny him 3 times (John 13:38). The disciples are confused, distressed, lost, disillusioned. The anticipatory grief is palpable. Had they left their jobs and their families and followed this man around for three years, only to find that it was all for naught?

Jump ahead some 60 years *after* Jesus’ death and resurrection, and we find *another* community of Jesus-followers who have gathered around the Gospel-writer John. **John’s** community is going through similar trials of confusion, uncertainty, and grief, though for a different reason. You see, John and his community had always thought of themselves as Jews, just as Jesus was. When the Jewish Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D., necessitating a totally new way of practicing the Jewish faith that was not dependent on Temple sacrifices, **John’s** community of Jews chose to re-constitute their Jewish faith along the lines of Jesus’ teachings and example. But *other* Jews – a much larger group – were re-constituting Judaism around a more rigorous interpretation of the Torah, the Jewish Law. And this second, majority group, had decided to excommunicate from their synagogues those Jews who, like John’s own community, were followers of Jesus.

And so, it is for **that** community – disillusioned, distraught, grieving the loss of their synagogue and their very religion, facing an unknown future – it is for that

emerging Christian community which had suffered so much loss that John writes his Gospel.

And, my friends, I think that we can all relate, both to Jesus' disciples on the night before his crucifixion *and* to John's community, expelled from their synagogue some 60 years later. For, just like them, we, too, have been grieving many losses. We have lost friends and relatives to COVID-19. Here at Christ Church, we lost Ed Dooley. Over 588,000 of our fellow Americans have died from COVID, and the number keeps rising.

Some people, today, are experiencing long-lasting, perhaps permanent, effects from contracting the coronavirus. They have lost some of their health, and consequently some of their freedom to fully function the way they used to. Loss, and grief.

People have lost jobs and income. We have all lost occasions of close, in-person contact with friends, family, and our spiritual community. We have lost a sense of security and safety – not only because of the ongoing threat of this lethal virus, but also because of the social unrest and senseless violence of this past year, and the heightened divisiveness caused by our polarized politics. We have lost safety, security, and civility.

We have lost a sense of control, of stability and predictability in our lives. And so, it is no wonder that we want to *recover* this sense of control and stability by returning to old, familiar ways – the way things were *before* the pandemic.

But our Gospel lesson today suggests that we should not be too hasty or reactive in our return to the familiar. Yes, we need to grieve what we have lost during this time – to *name* those things we have lost, bring them into the light of conscious awareness, and grieve. But Jesus tells us in today's Gospel that there are those things which we **need** to let go of, in good times and in bad, in order that we might grow, and bear the fruit of divine love and Life.

“I am the true vine,” Jesus says, “and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

Each Spring, I go out to my rose bed and cut out from my rose bushes all the branches that have died over the winter. Some new branches may be growing, but in the wrong direction; and they need to be pruned away, or they will invite disease later in the season. In fact, I need to be pruning and dead-heading all season long in order to keep the plants healthy and producing beautiful and divinely fragrant blossoms, which is **why** I grow roses in the first place.

And, my friends, it is important to remember – in *anything* we do – to remember **why** we do it. Why are you here, today? So often, I think, we just focus on the

What or the How, without ever paying attention to the Why. At least, I know that **I'm** guilty! Over these past several months, as we all have begun to see the light at the end of the tunnel of this pandemic, I have been focused almost exclusively on the What (getting back to worshipping in person) and the How (as safely as possible). But, I must confess, I have paid little attention to the Why. *Why* do we gather here in the first place? Why is Christ Church here, in this community of Canon City?

In a society where the marketplace mentality is so pervasive, it is tempting to think that our goal is putting more people in the pews, receiving more money in the offering plates, filling our Sunday School, offering more programs, growing numerically and fiscally like all those Big Box churches. But these are *results*. They say nothing about **Why**.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Apart from abiding in Christ, the true vine, you and I (the branches) can do nothing. Why? What does it mean to be a branch on Jesus' vine? Do we ever even ask ourselves that question? Or are we so focused on What we are doing and How we are doing it that we lose sight of our Why? Lose sight of our purpose, our reason?¹

"Abide With Me" is a familiar and popular hymn. But in our Gospel, Jesus is not speaking about his abiding **with** us, coming *alongside* us. Rather, he speaks of abiding **in** us, and we **in** him. The difference is important! Praying, "Be with us, Jesus" implies that we want Jesus to come alongside us in whatever you or I have already decided to do. **We** set the course, and then ask Jesus to give us support and encouragement in what we have decided to do. But abiding **in** Jesus means that divine, life-giving sap flows from the vine (Jesus) into the branches (you and I). The moment this life-giving sap *stops* flowing into us and through us, we can do nothing. "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine," says Jesus, "neither can you unless you abide in me." Our purpose, then, our Why, is to abide in the vine and draw our life from that vine. And if we do this, the What – bearing fruit – comes naturally. As one preacher has stated, "The branch doesn't put 'make grapes' on its to-do list. It just makes them, **because** it's part of the vine. And it never makes pears or avocados or olives—when we are connected to Jesus, we bear the fruit of Jesus."²

My friends, I would guess that, day in, day out, most of us don't act as though everything we do depends on our abiding in the vine, drawing our life from Christ's life. We branches tend to continue to grow in the direction we **have** been growing, even if growing in that direction is not conducive to producing more and better fruit.

The disciples in today's Gospel were already grieving the loss of their former lives, when they were traveling with Jesus throughout the countryside, listening to

him teach, watching him heal people and reach out to those whom society had marginalized. And those members of John's community, 60 years later, were grieving **their** former lives, when they had been fully accepted by their fellow Jews into their synagogue. Yet, in both instances, God had an even better future in store for them, though they could not see it yet. All they needed to do was abide in the vine, trust in the vine, and let the vine-grower prune them, in order that they might bear more and better fruit.

And so it is with us. This past year has been like a hail-storm that has beaten and ravaged us branches. We have lost leaves, tendrils, even fellow branches. We have been kept from growing in the directions we **had** been growing. And now, as the storm is subsiding, we are eager to resume growing in the ways and along the pathways we had before. But just as Jesus did not want his disciples to return to their old lives, but be born anew (John 3:3f) into resurrected life in him; and just as God had a greater future in store for John's community than their former way of life, so our Risen Lord is invited us to make the same journey into larger Life. We don't know What will be in store for us, nor do we know How it will play out. But we do know our Why: our purpose is to remain in the vine, drawing our life from the vine, allowing the vine grower to prune us, in order that we might produce more and better fruit for the world.

AMEN

1 Watch Simon Sinek's excellent TED talk

https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

2 Melissa Earley, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/may-2-easter-5b-john-151-8>